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ABSTRACT

Social psychologists have long been interested in the processes by which perceivers generate their inferences about individuals' and groups' decisions from their behavior. Attitude and preference inferences have been studied at the level of the individual target as well as the group target. This study investigated the effects of the social unit of the deciding faction (individual or group), the structural composition of the decision (structured or unstructured), and the type of decision (decision or nondecision) upon these inferences and upon people's perceptions of the support of decisions. College students (N=65) read scenarios describing various decisions which they rated in terms of the individuals' or groups' degree of support for the structured or unstructured decisions and nondecisions. No significant effects were found for the social unit (individual or group) of the deciding faction. Significant effects were found for the type and structure of the decision. A significant interaction was also found for type and structure. Future research should be conducted to investigate the effects of relevance and time upon people's perceptions of support for decisions. (Author/ABL)

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Perceived Support for Individual and Group Decisions

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Abstract

There is a tendency for people to infer information about individuals' and groups' decisions from their behaviors (Jones & Harris, 1967; Ross, 1977). This study investigates the effects of the social unit of the deciding faction (individual or group), the structural composition of the decision (structured or unstructured), and the type of decision (decision or nondecision) upon these inferences and upon people's perceptions of the support of decisions. The sixty-five subjects read scenarios describing various decisions which they rated in terms of the individuals' or groups' degree of support for the structured or unstructured decisions and nondecisions. No significant effects were found for the social unit of the deciding faction. Significant effects were found for the type and structure of the decision. A significant interaction was also found for type and structure.

Perceived Support for Individual and Group Decisions

Social psychologists have long been interested in the processes by which perceivers generate inferences about attitudes and preferences from behavior (Heider, 1958; Jones & Davis, 1965; Jones & McGillis, 1976). Attitude inferences have been studied at the level of the individual target (Ross, 1977) as well as the group target (Allison & Messick, 1985). At the group level, Allison and Beggan (1991) found that people hold an intuitive belief that group decisions are supported by 65% of the members. This belief in 65% support was shown to lead to overestimations in the amount of popular support for many real world decisions.

The purpose of the present research is threefold. First, this study investigates people's intuitive beliefs about the degree of support for individual decisions. A comparison will be made between the degree of perceived support for individual decisions and that of group decisions. Second, this study will investigate a possible discrepancy between people's perceived support for decisions and for nondecisions. The final point that will be investigated is one that compares people's ratings for structured and unstructured decisions. Based on literature explaining the group correspondence bias (Allison & Messick, 1985; Allison, Worth, & King, 1990), it is hypothesized that more structured decision-making processes will be viewed more critically, or semantically, than those

which merely provide a decision outcome which serves as a heuristic cue without the reasoning behind the decision.

Method

Subjects

Sixty-five male and female undergraduate students from the University of Richmond served as subjects in order to fulfill a basic requirement for an introductory Psychology course in which they were enrolled. The subjects received no payment for their participation other than course credit.

Procedure

The subjects read a series of scenarios describing various decisions (e.g. to lease a car) and nondecisions (e.g. not to lease a car). Half of the subjects read that these decisions were made by individuals, whereas the other half read that they were made by groups. In addition, half of the subjects read about structured decision-making processes (e.g. The VCU Biking Club had to decide whether to take a biking tour to France. If the number of members in favor exceeded those opposed, they would take the tour and vice versa.), while the other half read of unstructured scenarios (e.g. The VCU Biking Club decided to take a biking tour of France). The subjects were then asked to indicate the degree to which the individuals

or groups were in favor of their decisions or nondecisions on a 100-point Likert scale from 0 (not at all in favor) to 100 (totally in favor).

Results

Subjects' ratings of the degree of support for the individuals' or groups' nondecisions were compared in a 2 deciding faction (individual, group) x 2 structure of the decision (structured, unstructured) x 2 type of decision (decision, nondecision) analysis of variance (ANOVA) with a within subjects variable of type of decision. This analysis revealed a significant main effect for structure of the decision, F (1, 60) = 16.17, p < .01, such that the structured decisions yielded lower ratings of support (M = 68.97) than the unstructured decisions (M = 79.08). The significant main effect for type of decision, F (1, 60) = 32.11, p < .01, revealed that decisions (M = 78.29) yield higher ratings than nondecisions (M = 69.77). A statistically significant interaction was found for structure and type of decision, F (1, 60) = 5.09, p < .05. This interaction indicates that unstructured decisions receive the highest ratings (M = 85.04) while structured nondecisions receive the lowest ratings (M = 66.41). The ratings received for structured decisions (M = 71.54) and unstructured nondecisions (M = 73.12) were similar (See Table 1). No significant effects were found for the variable deciding faction. The three way interaction was not significant, F (1, 60) = .20, p > .05.

Discussion

The present study revealed that the subjects perceived greater support for decisions than for nondecisions. This finding indicates that the subjects had difficulty recognizing the fact that people generally support both their decisions and their nondecisions. Allison and Messick (1988) found that occurrences have more diagnostic value in social perception than nonoccurrences. According to this study, the subjects apparently could not interpret that these nondecisions were decisions just as the subjects in the study by Allison and Messick (1988) had difficulty recognizing the value of nonoccurrences.

The finding that subjects had greater support for unstructured decisions than for structured decisions indicates a higher level of semantic processing. The subjects were forced to process more systematically and acknowledge the lack of total support for decisions. The subjects could not merely rely on the group decision outcome within the structured decision in order to make their decisions as purported in the group correspondence bias (GCB) (Allison & Messick, 1985; Allison, Worth, & King, 1990); instead, they had to confront the decision making process that the group or individual employed such as taking a vote or weighing the pros and cons.

The present study did not reveal that people believe that individuals

are generally perceived to be more supportive of their decisions than groups are. This finding is inconsistent with previous research in social cognition which suggests that perceivers judge groups to be less homogeneous than individuals (Srull, Lichtenstein, & Rothbart, 1985). The lack of consistency may be due in part to the subjects' general understanding of the differences between individual and group processing as well as their understanding of the purpose within this project. It may also reflect the subjects' high level of semantic processing within their own decision making indicated by their high level of scholastic achievement which permitted their admission into a competitive university.

Future research should be conducted which investigates the effects of relevance and time upon people's perceptions of support for decisions. A possible interaction between the false consensus effect and the GCB would illustrate that people assume that others share their views and that people rate the targets' support according to the decision outcome and their personal decision in the situation. Time delays could indicate a larger discrepancy based upon the GCB as people forget the decision making context and remember only the outcome itself.

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Table 1. The mean subject ratings of the deciding faction's support for a given decision scenario across structure (structured or unstructured) and type of decision (decision or nondecision).

Type of	Structure of the decision	
Decision	Structured	Unstructured
Decision	71.54	85.04
Nondecision	66.41	73.12